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SummitTIMES

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Sikkim records 227 new cases and two more Covid deaths

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

The number of active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim reached 2,637 on Sunday with 227 fresh cases reported in the last 24 hours.

Out of the 227 new cases, 143 were reported from East District, 52 from South and 32 from West Sikkim.

Also over the same 24 hours, two more persons succumbed to novel coronavirus infection in the State taking Sikkim's COVID-19 related death toll to 167.

Both the deaths were reported from the STNM Hospital.

The 227 new cases were picked up from the testing of 808 samples on Saturday, of which 158 were found in RT-PCR testing of 650 samples, one in CB-NAAT of six samples and 68 in rapid antigen testing of 152 samples.

There are currently 242 Covid patients admitted in three hospitals in the State - 133 at STNM Hospital, 97 at CRH-Tadong and 12 at Mangan District Hospital - 59 of whom were admitted in the past 24 hours.

14 of the Covid patients in hospital are in ICU - 10 at STNM hospital and 04 at Central Referral Hospital, Tadong.

2,367 Covid-positive people are in home isolation since they are either asymptomatic or have very mild symptoms not requiring hospitalisation and the three Covid Care Centres are attending to 22 people.

Also over the same time-frame, 116 more people were released from home isolation to further improve the figure of recovered Covid cases in Sikkim to 6,869. Meanwhile, Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 reported so far stands at 9,879.

Only 163 vaccinations on Sunday

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Where the number of vaccination sites in the State range from 55 to above-60 on "working days" of the week, the number dropped to a mere 6 on Sunday and a total of merely 163 given their vaccine shots today. All these doses were administered in East district with no vaccines administered in any of the other three districts.

Himanta Biswa Sarma to be next Assam CM



GUWAHATI, MAY 9 (PTI):

North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) convenor Himanta Biswa Sarma has been unanimously elected as the leader of the BJP Legislature Party on Sunday and consequently will soon be invited to form government as the Chief Minister of the state, central observer and Union Agricultural Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said on Sunday.

Sarma's name was proposed by Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and seconded by BJP state party president Ranjeet Kumar Dass and newly elected Haflong MLA Nandita Garlosa.

As no other names were proposed, 'Sarma has been unanimously elected as the BJP Legislature Party leader'.

Tomar said BJP will soon hold a meeting with its alliance partners the AGP and the UPPL.

The AGP Legislature

party which also held a meeting on Sunday announced that it would support the leader elected by the BJP Legislature Party.

Earlier in the day, Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal tendered his resignation to Governor Jagadish Mukhi who as is tradition, asked him to continue till the formation of the next government.

The party's central leadership had summoned Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, both contenders for the top post, to New Delhi on Saturday for discussions on the formation of the next government in the state.

Of the 126 assembly seats in Assam, the ruling alliance has secured 75 seats with BJP winning 60 while its alliance partners AGP got nine seats and UPPL six.

Test positivity rate shows signs of plateauing, but Covid beds filling up

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

The 227 new cases reported in the 24 hours ending 8AM Sunday were picked up from the screening of 808 samples, giving Sikkim a Test Positivity Rate of 28%, a figure at which TPR appears to have plateaued at in this second wave of infections.

It is possible that the positivity rate will hover at this average at least for the coming week since there are only so many samples the two VRD Labs in the State can test in a day and this is the average percentage that returns positive among primary contacts, but that should not be reason to grow complacent; a tendency which is likely since the effect of the partial lockdown will soon start manifesting in the TPR. The virus is far from contained, and future waves cannot be written off. It is important then that the planners do better than just react to situations and plan adequately ahead of time.

For instance, the surge in daily cases has already occupied almost all the available Covid beds in the State.

As per data maintained by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme of the Health Department, Sikkim has a total of 256 Covid beds across the

State, 247 of which are already occupied as of Sunday.

Today for instance, 57 more patients were admitted into hospital. While the number of new cases will be very low tomorrow since both VRD Labs will be closed today giving hospitals a 24 hour reprieve in demand for Covid beds, there are still 2,367 Covid-positive people in home isolation in Sikkim at present, some of whom could develop symptoms requiring hospitalisation and there are only so many beds left.

STNM Hospital is expanding its Covid wing to the 8th and 9th floor and this will give it an additional 115 beds taking the number of Covid beds available at the super speciality facility to 240. That will help, but if hospitalisations continue in the present clip, even these will hold only for so long.

It is not clear yet whether the 115 more beds have already been prepared for fresh cases. While the announcement was made about a week back, the IDSP table has still not reflected the expanded capacity at STNM Hospital.

That said, since the second wave has already been in Sikkim for three weeks, the number of patients being discharged will also now start increasing soon, but that graph



has not started climbing just yet. On Sunday, for instance, only 5 patients were discharged from hospital and sent to home isolation.

STNM Hospital, which the latest official records show as having 125 dedicated Covid beds, is already attending to 118 Covid patients. The Central Referral Hospital at Tadong, meanwhile, has 97 patients [37 of whom were taken in today] admitted in its 100-bed Covid wing.

Mangan District Hospital has six Covid-dedicated beds [as per IDSP] and already has

12 Covid patients admitted.

The district hospitals at Gyalshing and Namchi have no Covid patients at present.

The only ICU facilities available for Covid patients are at STNM Hospital and CRH and even these are already operating at full capacity with eight of 10 ICU beds at STNM Hospital currently occupied and all of the four Covid ICU beds at CRH with patients on them.

Senior officials and even some elected representatives have commented in the recent weeks that Covid-positive peo-

ple not requiring hospitalisation have been insisting that they be admitted into hospital. Given the heightened fear that the second wave has sparked, such insistence is understandable, but if this is going to stress the available resources to the detriment of the more serious patients, perhaps better communication is required.

Also, the three Covid Care Centres opened in the State are currently running mostly empty, accommodating on 22 Covid-positive people when they have capacity for much more.

Former Minister Neeru Sewa becomes Doctor of Philosophy

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Neeru Sewa, who had emerged in 2009 as the first lady Minister in Sikkim, is now also the first MLA of the State to continue pursuing formal education and earning a PhD degree.

The 5th Convocation of Sikkim Professional University on 08 May saw Ms Sewa receive her degree as a Doctor of Philosophy after having successfully defended her Ph.D. thesis - "Women Empowerment in Sikkim through Panchayati Raj Institutions" in February.

An official press release informs that Ms Sewa had registered as a Research Scholar at SPU in 2015 and undertook research under the guidance of Prof. Sudha Jha, Principal, VMSU College of Arts & Humanities; Prof. Jash-



want Sokhi, Pro-Vice Chancellor, SPU and Dr. P.K. Mishra, Principal, Surya Sen Mahavidyalaya, Siliguri.

After completing her school from North Sikkim, Ms Sewa graduated from Sikkim Government College,

Tadong, and then MA in Sociology and B.Ed from IGNOU.

In 2007, she became the first woman in Sikkim to be elected Zilla Up-Adhaksya and two years later became an MLA and Minister in the State.

103-year-old man from Maharashtra's Palghar beats COVID-19



PALGHAR, 09 MAY [PTI]: A 103-year-old man from Palghar in Maharashtra has recovered from COVID-19 despite being in the vulnerable age group, officials said on Sunday.

Shamrao Ingle, a native of Virendra Nagar area, was admitted to a rural COVID-19 hospital in Palghar after he contracted the infection.

He was discharged on Saturday after recovering from the disease, a spokesperson of the district collectorate said in a release.

According to doctors at the hospi-

tal, the elderly man responded well to the medical treatment provided to him and co-operated with the staff at the facility.

He walked out of the hospital with a smile on Saturday.

Palghar Collector Dr Manik Gursal and the hospital staff greeted the centenarian with flowers at the time of his discharge.

The district has so far reported a total of 95,682 COVID-19 cases and 1,715 deaths due to the disease, as per official figures.

Covid-norms and vaccination shield against mutants, future waves: Experts

NEW DELHI, 09 MAY [PTI]: With the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the country and concerns being raised about a possible third wave, experts caution that the next wave could be less severe if people keep following COVID-appropriate behaviour and a large portion of the population is vaccinated.

According to the Union Health Ministry data released on Sunday morning, India recorded 4,03,738 fresh COVID-19 cas-

es in the last 24 hours, pushing the country's cumulative tally to 2,22,96,414, while the death count climbed to 2,42,362 with 4,092 daily deaths.

There has been a sharp surge in infections over the past couple of months, making the second wave much worse than the first one that began in early 2020 and peaked in the last quarter of that year before the tally hit a trough in the first quarter of 2021.

Several experts believe that a casual approach that followed the

trough of the first wave could be a possible reason for the pandemic raising its head again, though others are also putting the blame on the new mutants and variants of the virus being more virulent.

K VijayRaghavan, Principal Scientific Adviser, had said on Wednesday last week that the third wave was inevitable and it was necessary to be prepared for new waves, but clarified two days later that the "insidious asymptomatic transmission" can be stopped if prescribed guide-

lines about precautions, surveillance, containment, treatment and testing are followed.

"If we take strong measures, the third wave may not happen in all places or indeed anywhere at all. It depends on much how effectively guidance is implemented at the local level in the states, districts and cities everywhere," he said. According to experts, in a few months when the immunity people have developed naturally or with the help of vaccination fades, the virus

strikes again and the only thing that can stop the virus from bouncing back is how people are guarding themselves. "Early this year, as the new cases receded, people started interacting as if there was no virus. The immunity had already started declining. They organised mass gatherings, they stopped wearing masks, giving the opportunity to the virus to strike again," said Dr Anurag Agarwal, director, Institute of Genomics and Integral Biology, New Delhi.

Chamling wants govt to expand Covid-care infrastructure, offers Jorethang party office for Covid ward

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Sikkim Democratic Front president, form Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, has called on the SKM Government to expand the Covid-care infrastructure in the State, provide better support and incentive for the health workers, come up with a proper economic revival plan and enforce Covid protocols more strictly.

Addressing a query posed to him on Facebook, a weekly ritual every Sunday, Mr Chamling wants the medical infrastructure reinforced. The medical frater-

nity is under tremendous stress, he contends, while suggesting that Covid wards be opened at all the district hospitals and a safe working environment organised for the health workers.

"In order to protect their families from possible infection, they should be provided with good lodging facilities in nearby hotels. They need complete moral support and encouragement. I had asked the government to cover their lives with life insurance of Rs 1 crore. I reiterate that suggestion," he stresses.

He also suggests that the Health Department

constitute a 'study team' to study global trends of coronavirus and best treatment methods, and health workers assigned to Covid duty given rapid basic training on Covid care and treatment.

He points out that there is a possibility of shortage of healthcare workers soon and suggests that students from local nursing and medical colleges be trained and engaged as part of the Covid work force.

Also, unemployed nurses and doctors can be employed to meet the emergency need, he adds.

On his party's behalf,

Mr Chamling has also offered the SDF party office at Jorethang for use by the government as a Covid ward if necessary.

Highlighting that the pandemic is projected to increase poverty, he rues that the findings and recommendations of the Sikkim Economic Revival Committee remain unknown.

The state needs a proper economic revival plan, he states, while reiterating his suggestion that Rs 1,000 crore be set aside as a Covid Management Fund.

"The government has to devise a mechanism to give relief mon-

ey directly to the poor and to ration essential commodities. Farmers, unsalaried workers and drivers must be provided with economic relief at the earliest. The humiliation that drivers had to go through during the first lockdown of endlessly waiting for relief must be avoided. Many drivers have not received their relief money of Rs. 5000 even today. Local entrepreneurs and small business vendors whose businesses have closed down under the stress of the pandemic must be identified and compensated with the sole objective of reviving their

business. No business should be allowed to die in Sikkim. We need local businesses to grow," he details.

Commenting that the Sikkim administration has come across as the "most confused one in the whole country," Mr Chamling flags the "frequently changing" notifications and defiance of protocols by leaders and senior bureaucrats as causing a demoralizing effect on the people.

The government must punish erring government officials and powerful politicians according to the law, he adds.

NHPC sanitizes Yangang Bazaar



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

NHPC, Teesta-V Power Station, sanitized Yangyang Bazaar in South Sikkim on Sunday.

An NHPC press release informs that youth from Yangyang Bazar Committee had requested NHPC through the Project Hospital CMO to help with the sanitization.

Today, the Power Station's fire render equipped to provide sanitization measures was deployed and the task completed.

NHPC staff also sensitized the residents to continue maintaining Covid-appropriate behavior and following government guidelines in this regard, the release adds.

SPU convenes 5th Convocation online



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Sikkim Professional University held its 5th Convocation on Saturday through online mode and shared it live on Facebook and YouTube.

Union Minister of State for MSME, Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, Pratap Chandra Sarangi, joined as the chief and delivered the Convocation Address along with Lok

Sabha MP Achyuta Samanta as guest of honour, Additional CS, Education Department, GP Upadhyaya, Chairperson-SPU, Hemant Kumar Goyal, Vice Chancellor Prof SS Hasan; and Pro Vice Chancellor Prof Jaswant Sokhi.

Also on the day, Achyuta Samanta, Dr Jagannath Patnaik and Karuna Sagar were awarded Honoris Causa degrees.

WHO's top scientist on factors behind India's Covid explosion

GENEVA, 09 MAY [AFP]: A COVID-19 variant spreading in India is more contagious and may be dodging vaccine protections, contributing to the country's explosive outbreak, the World Health Organization's chief scientist said Saturday.

In an interview with AFP, Soumya Swaminathan warned that "the epidemiological features that we see in India today do indicate that it's an extremely rapidly spreading variant".

India on Saturday for the first time registered more than 4,000 Covid-19 deaths in just 24 hours, and more than 400,000 new infections.

Ms Swaminathan, a paediatrician and clinical scientist, said the B.1.617 variant of Covid-19, which was first detected in last October, was clearly a contributing factor to the catastrophe unfolding in her homeland.

"There have been many accelerators that are fed into this," the 62-year-old said, stressing that "a more rapidly spreading virus is one of them".

The WHO recently listed B.1.617 -- which counts several sub-lineages with slightly different mutations and characteristics -- as a "variant of interest".

Resistant to antibodies?

But so far it has stopped short of adding it to its short list of "variant of concern" -- a label indicating it is more dangerous than the original version of the virus by being more transmissible, deadly or able to get past vaccine protections.

Several national health authorities, including in the United States and Britain, have meanwhile said they consider B.1.617 a variant of concern, and Swaminathan said she expected the WHO to soon follow suit.

"B 1.617 is likely to be a variant of concern because it has some mutations which increase transmission, and which also potentially could make (it) resistant to antibodies that are generated by vaccination or by natural infection," she said.

But she insisted that the variant alone could not be blamed for the dramatic surge in cases and deaths seen in India, lamenting that the country appeared to have let down its guard down, with "huge social mixing and large gatherings".

But even as many in India felt the crisis was over, dropping mask-wearing and other protection measures, the virus was quietly spreading.

"Taking off vertically" "In a large country like India, you could have transmission at low levels, which is what happened for many months," Swaminathan said.

"It was endemic (and) probably gradually increasing," she said, decrying that "those early signs were missed until it reached the point at which it was taking off vertically." "At that point it's very hard to suppress, because it's then involving tens of thousands of people and it's multiplying at a rate at which it's very difficult to stop."

From student body to Assam Chief Minister: Long journey for Himanta Biswa Sarma

GUWAHATI, 09 MAY [NDTV]:

Himanta Biswa Sarma, 52, will succeed Sarbananda Sonowal as the 15th Chief Minister of Assam after the BJP-led alliance won with a landslide of 78 votes in the assembly elections, the results of which was declared on May 2. The BJP alone had won 60 seats. Mr Sarma, who held important portfolios such as Health, Finance, Education and PWD and Mr Sonowal, a former Union Minister dubbed "Jatiya Nayak" in the state -- were the frontrunners for the post.

For Mr Sarma, the state's top job is a culmination of a long and arduous journey that started at the All Assam Students' Union. He was the General Secretary at the prestigious Cotton

College Union Society in 1991-1992 while pursuing a masters' degree in Political Science.

Being in AASU that once spearheaded the Assam Agitation - from 1979 to 1985 -- Mr Sarma grew closer to Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who was the face of regionalism in the state and Bhriku Kumar Phukan of the Asom Gana Parishad, formed after the signing of the Assam Accord 1985.

But for him, the real political journey began in the mid-'90s when Congress's then Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia -- considered the craftiest CM the state has ever had - brought him into the Congress. That paid dividends years after his death, when Mr Sarma beat his political mentor



Bhriku Phukan in Jalukbari constituency.

He won from this constituency in 2006, 2011 and 2016. This year, he won with a margin of more than one lakh votes.

In the Congress, he became then Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's "blue-

eyed-boy" and handled multiple portfolios.

But they had a fall-out in 2013 after Tarun Gogoi decided to project his son Gaurav Gogoi, narrowing Mr Sarma's ambition of succeeding him to the top job.

Finally, after a two-

year-long dissidence, Mr Sarma walked out with 10 other MLAs to join the BJP.

During his tenure at the Congress, Mr Sarma also got entangled in various controversies -- the allegations of involvement in Louis Berg-

er bribery scam and the Sardha Chit Fund case. Though not convicted in any, they continue to haunt his political career.

Since joining the BJP, Mr Sarma had not only handled prime portfolios -- Finance, health, Education and PWD -- he also opened the doors to the northeast for the BJP as the convenor of the North East Democratic Alliance.

In Arunachal Pradesh, he crafted a coup that upstaged the Congress. In Manipur, he stitched up a BJP alliance in 2017. His deal-making ensured a BJP government in Meghalaya as well. In Nagaland, Sarma, universally known as "HBS", was the key figure in the alliance between the Naga People's Front, the National Democratic Progressive Party and the BJP.

TMC retained all seats in city on the back of populist schemes, worsening COVID-19 situation

KOLKATA, MAY 9 (PTI):

Trinamool Congress has retained all 14 assembly seats in the city defeating rival BJP by convincing margins in the recent West Bengal assembly poll on the back of populist schemes and the worsening COVID-19 situation, despite the shrill polarisation bid by the saffron party.

The overwhelming support for TMC was seen in Jorasanko, Bhabanipur and Kolkata Port constituencies of the city despite their sizeable mixed populations.

Jorasanko, which has a mixed population with a large percentage of Hindi speaking migrants from other states, elected Vivek Gupta of TMC secured 52,123 votes while his nearest BJP rival Meena Devi Purohit got 39,380 votes.

In Bhabanipur, the only constituency in the state where Union Home Minister Amit Shah held door-to-door campaigning, TMC veteran Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay got 73505 votes while his nearest rival poll debutant actor-turned-BJP leader Rudranil Ghosh secured 44786.

In Kolkata Port seat TMC heavyweight Firhad Hakim secured 1,05,543 votes against 36,989 by his BJP rival Awadh Kishore Gupta.

The poll in the 292 seats of the state was held over a protracted eight phases. Election to two seats were cancelled following the death of their candidates.

Political analysts attributed the clean sweep by TMC in the city to factors like the worsening COVID-19 situation in the state in the later phases, the demand by TMC for clubbing the last three phases on grounds of concern for public health and the continued road show and rallies by heavyweight BJP leaders till the Election Commission's ban on meetings.

The campaign against BJP by several Left organisations and minorities uniting to vote en block against the saffron party also played out as favourable reasons for TMC's win.

The single most important factor that went in favour of TMC was a slew of its populist social welfare schemes like Duare Sarkar (government at the doorstep), Duare Ration (ration at the doorsteps) and Swasthya Sathi, which is a basic health cover for secondary and tertiary care up to Rs 5 lakh per annum per family.

Political analyst Sibaji Pratim Basu said, "During the last phases a perception had gained ground that TMC will retain power in the state. It also weighed in the minds of voters, including the Hindi-speaking Bihari population in pockets of Jorasanko and Bhabanipur".

He said that the innumerable visits by BJP top leaders from outside Bengal, their shrill polarisation bid, the long polling itinerary and the seeming lack of direction

or prior assessment by EC about the emerging situation had led to the perception by the general people that the saffron party is more concerned about vote than the health of the people.

"This perception was countered by TMC's persistent campaign to club the last phases which the EC ignored. This apparently influenced a section of electorate," he added.

Other factors are campaign for TMC by parties like the RJD which has influence over migrants from Bihar and BJP not projecting a chief ministerial face, Basu said.

The voters of the city, known for their political awareness, were conscious about the difference between Lok Sabha vote and Vidhan Sabha vote while exercising their franchise, he said.

"The trend in Delhi, where BJP suffers defeat in assembly polls but wins Lok Sabha seats appears to have started in Kolkata," he said.

Among those TMC leaders who won by large margins are Subrata Mukherjee who secured 1,06,585 votes against 31,226 of BJP's Lokenath Chatterjee in prestigious Ballygunge seat.

Another TMC heavyweight Partha Chatterjee bagged 1,14,778 votes against actor-turned-BJP contestant Srabanti Chatterjee from Behala Paschim seat.

In Kasba seat minister Javed Khan polled 1,21,372 votes against

57,750 votes secured by BJP's Indranil Khan.

In Behala Purba seat Ratna Chatterjee, the estranged wife of former mayor Sovan Chatterjee, who quit BJP recently after leaving Trinamool Congress three years back, secured 1,10,968 votes against the 73,540 votes polled by another actor-turned-contestant Payel Sarkar of BJP.

In seats like Shyam-pukur, Maniktala, Rashbehari, Kashipur-Belgachhia, Entally, Chorangee, Belegghata important party functionaries like ministers Sashi Panja and Sadhan Pandey, KMC ex-mayor-in-council Debashis Kumar, Atin Ghosh, Swarnakamal Saha, Nayna Bandyopadhyay and Paresh Pal won comfortably retaining the seats and proving some poll pundits wrong.

In high profile Tollygunge seat minister Aroop Biswas secured 1,01,440 votes against union minister and Asansol BJP MP Babul Supriyo who polled 51,360 votes.

In adjacent Jadavpur, TMC's Debabrata Majumder got 98,100 votes against 59,231 won by Chakraborty. BJP's Rinku Naskar, who had recently left the Left party to join the saffron camp secured 53,139 votes.

In all the seats except Jorasanko Trinamool maintained the winning

trend from the start of counting and the margin kept increasing as the counting progressed, a political analyst said.

"In Jorasanko, BJP had lead in earlier trends for a considerable time, but Gupta finally managed to push Meena Devi Purohit of BJP behind. The voting pattern of the entire city was decisively against the BJP," he said adding the results will boost TMC's confidence level.

In parts of Rashbehari, Bhabanipur segments TMC had trailed behind BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls as also in Jorasanko. But the trend changed in the 2021 hustings in an emphatic manner, he added.

According to the district-wise percentage TMC secured over 60 per cent votes in Kolkata, followed by around 30 per cent by BJP. Rest of the votes were shared by other contenders including the Left Front.

BJP candidate from Jorasanko, Purohit said the sudden spike in COVID-19 cases led to many people staying away from voting and this helped TMC.

"Of the 12,000 voters in a ward of Jorasanko not more than 5,000 turned up. This scenario was repeated across the city in the last two phases," she claimed.

The CPI-M, which failed to make much dent in the city during the 34-year-long regime of the Left Front, saw its

ATTC holds second phase of induction prog for NAB accreditation

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Advanced Technical Training Centre [ATTC], Bardang, conducted the second phase programme of a three-week online AICTE-ISTE-sponsored induction programme for National Board of Accreditation [NBA] accreditation from 03 to

08 May, an ATTC press release informs. The first phase was conducted earlier from 26 April to 01 May.

The release adds that addressing the panel, Additional Chief Secretary, Education Department, GP Upadhyaya, emphasized the need for endurance during this pandemic and en-

couraged all participants to utilize this time to enhance their learning while keeping safe.

Vice Chairman, AICTE, Prof MP Poonia, also reminded participants of their duties as teachers and more importantly as role-models for the youth, while president, Indian Society

for Technical Education (ISTE), Dr Pratapsinh Kakasaheb Desai, spoke on practical problems faced by students and urged the teachers to make themselves more relevant by using the latest technical developments to fulfil the real expectations from engineers.

The release adds

that the online webinar was attended by over 160 participants from all over the country and some of the resource persons who spoke on various topics were Dr Habiba Hussain, NITTTR, Kolkata, Dr Kandarpa Kumar Saia Pvt Ltd. and other senior faculty members from ATTC, Sikkim.

BJP MLA's son gets Covid vaccine ahead of official schedule for his age group

DEHRADUN, 09 MAY [PTI]:

A controversy has erupted in Uttarakhand over a BJP MLA's 25-year-old son getting the anti-coronavirus vaccine jab despite the fact that inoculation of people in his age group is yet to begin in the state.

The vaccination process for people aged

18-44 years begins officially in Uttarakhand on Monday. However, BJP MLA from Khanpur Kunwar Pranav Singh Champion's son Divya Pratap Singh Champion got the jab on May 5.

The controversy broke out when pictures of Divya Pratap Singh getting the vaccine shot went viral on

social media on Saturday.

Doon hospital staff requesting anonymity said the MLA, along with his wife and son, arrived at the medical superintendent's residence on May 5 and allegedly pressured the doctors to administer the vaccine dose to his son.

When contacted, the MLA said his son got the vaccine shot as he is a frontline worker actively involved in stopping the spread of the virus.

Further, the MLA's son got a shot of Covaxin at a time when most people in the state are being administered Covishield vaccine.

Covaxin is available only at a select few centres in the state.

Kunwar Pranav Singh Champion is not new to controversies. He was in the news a few years ago when a video clip in which he was seen dancing to a popular Bollywood number with guns in his hands went viral.

Tax required to keep cost low, Nirmala Sitharaman contends

NEW DELHI, 09 MAY [NDTV]:

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday said that a 5 per cent tax on vaccines and 12 per cent on medicines and oxygen concentrators was necessary to keep costs low, after a new appeal by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to waive these fees given India's coronavirus crisis.

"If full exemption from GST (Goods and Services Tax) were given, the domestic producers of these items would be unable to offset taxes paid on their inputs and input services and would pass these on to the end consumers by increasing their price," she explained in a string of 16 tweets.

Input tax credit refers to the refund that manufacturers can claim



on tax paid on raw materials and services used to make their products, thus making it cheaper. Things with zero tax are not allowed to use this relief, according to current rules.

Ms Sitharaman also said that COVID-19 drugs and related items have already been exempted from import taxes and 70 per cent of the Integrated

Goods and Services Tax (IGST) goes down to the states.

The Finance Minister's response comes after Mamata Banerjee wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday, asking for tax waivers on the import of medicines and equipment needed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was Ms Banerjee's

third letter to PM Modi - since being sworn in for a third term on Wednesday - on the coronavirus crisis in the state and in the rest of the country. On Friday she wrote to highlight a potential oxygen supply crisis.

This is Chief Minister Banerjee's third letter to PM Modi on the Covid crisis

West Bengal and other states in India have been hammered by a vicious second wave of the coronavirus - which coincided with campaigning and voting for the 2021 Assembly election that Ms Banerjee's Trinamool won - that has overwhelmed hospitals and left people dying from oxygen and treatment shortage.

This morning the state reported over 19,000 new Covid cases in 24 hours to take the active caseload to more than 1.25 lakh. Over 12,000 people have died so far.

Ms Banerjee has ordered a partial lockdown of the state, including extensive restrictions on movement and requiring all visitors to show a Covid-negative report no older than 72 hours.

"Allow virtual Parliamentary Committees": Trinamool reiterates again

NEW DELHI, 09 MAY [NDTV]:

The Trinamool Congress has written another letter, its third, to both Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla underscoring the need to hold virtual meetings of parliamentary committees as the deadly second wave of the coronavirus sweeping through a wide swathe of the country has been worsening the health crisis.

Referred to as mini-Parliament, these Committees hold the government accountable on micro-issues.

"India has reported more than 3 lakhs new Covid-19 cases per day for the past two weeks.

In light of the prevailing circumstances, I urge your good offices to reconsider our request for conducting virtual meetings of parliamentary committees including departmentally related standing committees, consultative committees and select committees," wrote Tri-

namool's Derek O'Brien, a Rajya Sabha member, in a letter dated May 7.

The earlier two letters were written in July and August last year.

Citing the confidentiality clause, the centre has said no to opposition requests in the past.

The chief Trinamool spokesperson, quoting from a letter received in August last year, pointed out that it was decided in a meeting that the matter regarding holding of virtual meetings of the Parliamentary Committees was to be referred to the Committees on Rules in both the Houses.

"I further request you to share any findings/decisions that the Committees on Rules of both the Houses may have reached," said Mr Brien.

The leader signed off his letter stressing on the need for the Parliamentary Committees to function virtually so that issues of pub-

lic importance can be taken up "timely and discussed", adding for good effect, "especially in light of the serious circumstances in the country".

Last last month, Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh, Chairman of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science and Technology, and Shashi Tharoor, IT Committee head, appealed to the centre to allow virtual meetings of the parliamentary panels.

On Saturday, international medical journal The Lancet said India had "squandered" its early successes in controlling COVID-19, and that Prime Minister Modi's government could preside over "a self-inflicted national catastrophe", and urged it to start "owning up to its mistakes".

The country has registered more than four lakh new cases in each of the past four days, and more than three lakh a day since April 22.

Chhattisgarh Govt allows home delivery of liquor amid lockdown

RAIPUR, 09 MAY [PTI]:

The Chhattisgarh government has allowed home delivery of liquor in the state through online sale during the ongoing coronavirus-enforced lockdown, officials said on Sunday.

The opposition BJP in Chhattisgarh criticised the ruling Congress over the decision, claiming that it seems the state government's priority was to provide liquor to people instead of medical facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

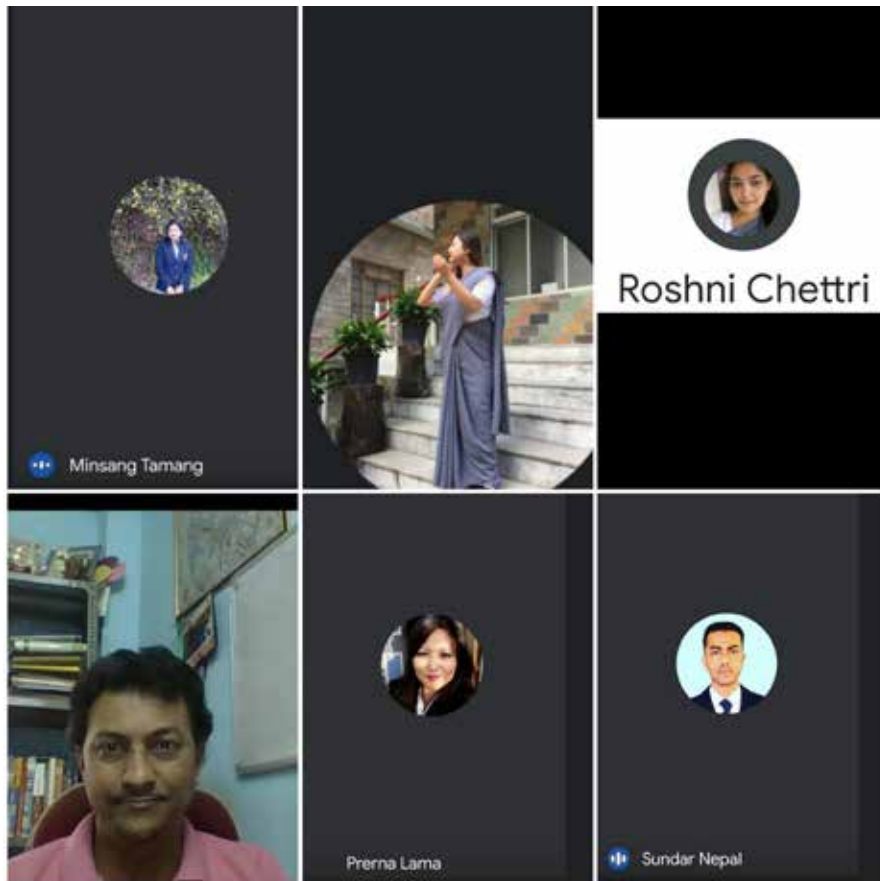
The state commercial taxes department in an order on Saturday gave permission to the excise commissioner to allow home delivery of liquor through online orders, officials said.

During the lockdown, liquor shops are not allowed to open in the state.

"To curb illegal manufacturing, sale, transportation and possession of liquor during the lockdown period, permission has been granted for its home delivery through online orders from Monday," an official from the excise department said.

Timings for the home delivery of liquor have been fixed from 9 am to 8 pm.

Harkamaya College organises webinar on Inclusive Education



SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 09 MAY:

Harkamaya College of Education organized a webinar on "Inclusive Education" on Saturday.

Inclusive Education, a press release informs, is part of a paper in the 4th semester of the B.Ed course.

Professor Kumar Vibhav and Minsang Ta-

mang (a 4th semester B.Ed. student) jointly organized the webinar which had three guest speakers from among the Persons With Disabilities community and one from Stars Of Hope.

The guest speakers were Sonam Diki Bhutia (president, PDCS) who is an post-graduate in German language from JNU and is

currently preparing for the civil services exams, BB Subba who is a government employee, Bimal Thapa who is the first visually impaired person to complete a B.Ed. course from Soreng College and Kusum Chettri (Maths professor at Sikkim Professional University) representing Stars of hope.

"Becoming Tyrannical": Kerala poet over Facebook ban on 'BJP Defeat' post

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, 09 MAY [NDTV]:

A Kerala-based poet has alleged that he was blocked by Facebook for 24 hours for posting a video on the Bharatiya Janata Party's loss in the recently-concluded assembly elections in the state. The "satirical video", K Satchidanandan said, was sent to him as a WhatsApp forward after which he shared on the social media platform. The BJP has denied any role in the incident.

"I was barred from posting or commenting on Facebook because I posted a widely shared video - a satire on BJP's defeat in Kerala. The clipping is from a movie where Hitler is addressing his soldiers after defeat, and the Malayalam commentary in it was about Amit Shah and senior BJP leaders speaking to party workers in Kerala after defeat. The post was a satire, it was critical but was not abusive of anyone," Mr Satchidanandan told NDTV.

The poet said he also received a warning from

Facebook when he made a post on Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month.

"I also received a warning from Facebook earlier on April 21 when I had put up a post against PM Modi demanding his resignation. There is a conspiracy between the government and Facebook because India is a big consumer. And BJP has a massive IT cell, they must be watching us - people who are known or have influence on others," Mr Satchidanandan said.

"This is clearly suppression of freedom of speech. Social media should allow their space to express our protest or frustrations. This is becoming very tyrannical," he added.

The BJP has denied any role in the incident. "BJP at the state or centre has nothing to do with the poet's post that has been deleted or the action against him by Facebook. All this is for Facebook to explain," National Democratic Alliance convenor in Kerala PK Krish-

nadas said.

Kerala Finance Minister, Thomas Isaac, criticised Facebook's move, calling it "deplorable".

"In solidarity with Satchidanandan leading contemporary Malayalam poet and former secretary of National Sahitya Academy, whose Facebook account has been closed for posting a video on PM Modi in relation to BJP defeat in recent Kerala election .A most deplorable act .#Facebook," Mr Issac tweeted.

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor also expressed solidarity with Mr Satchidanandan, whom he addressed as one of state's "greatest living poets". "We must not allow censorship into our politics," Mr Tharoor said.

Scripting history, the LDF retained power in Kerala, bucking the over four decade-long trend of oscillating between communist and Congress-led fronts alternately.

The LDF won 99 of the total 140 seats, while the opposition UDF had to settle for the remaining 41 and BJP drew a blank.

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ANTHYESTI KRIYA (AARGHU)

The 21 days Anthyesti Kriya of Late Shri Prem Kumar Gurung S/o Late Shri B.B Gurung, who left for his heavenly abode on 24th of April, 2021 (Saturday) falls on 15th of May, 2021 (Saturday).

All relatives, friends and well wishers are requested to join the bereaved family in offering prayers for the departed soul at their *Ancestral Home, Nalam, Namthang, South Sikkim* while keeping in mind the prescribed CoVid-19 protocols.

The family members also express gratitude to all those who stood by them during the time of bereavement.

RSVP

Sakun Gurung (Wife) : +91-9474350770
Anshika Gurung (Daughter) : +91-7908045388
Ashim Gurung (Son) : +91-9064079336
Ashok Kr. Gurung (Brother) : +91-9434445494

Words Across Boundaries

Language is not just for conversations, and literature not just to entertain. They are more importantly about communicating ideas and thoughts, sharing information and inspiring more refined understandings. Towards that end, the written word becomes the vehicle in which language rides on its desired journey, carrying ideas and information to build consensus and fashion opinions. Writing also fills the role of recording the times they are written in, and for making them the mirrors that reflect the times contemporaneous to the times they emerged from.

Having the tools to use language effectively for communication then becomes empowerment.

The Sahitya Akademi recently organised a statewide debate competition in a State language rarely heard beyond the community which still speaks it and never of the quality or depth that debates require. This was a welcome initiative, but a rare one. By the time Sikkim emerges from the second wave and finds the courage to host events again, the State will be preparing for Bhanu Jayanti. Yes, looks like it will take at least two months for normalcy to get attempted again, and if vaccination picks up pace and infections settle down some, Sikkim might be in a celebratory mood by July. That digression aside, when the world celebrates the birth anniversary of Adikavi Bhanubhakta Acharya or the birth anniversary of Padre Ganga Prasad Pradhan a week before that, some commonalities should not be overlooked. The two stalwarts have much in common even if they belonged to different faiths. Both understood the significance of language and appreciated the importance of translations. Where the Adikavi translated the Ramayana from elitist Sanskrit to the people's language of Nepali [printed in 1887 two decades after his death], the Padre translated the Bible into Nepali. Both these efforts are upwards of a century in the past. To pay true homage to the two giants of Nepali language, its speakers, writers and readers should ideally resolve to make the literary and philosophical output in their language more significant and more widely followed and also, in keeping with the idea of translations that the two clearly understood, also consciously work towards introducing Nepali readers to more works from the world over in their own language, and also sponsoring efforts to make the best works of Nepali available in more languages [in translation].

At the time when the Acharya and the Padre wrote and translated, religion was the most [and to a large extent, only] powerful idea around; in the present day and age of information overload, there are many more ideas that need wider sharing. There is the argument that people are multilingual nowadays and that this has reduced the number of translations required. This, however, is not necessary correct because nuances and subtleties are best understood and appreciated in the mother tongue. Also, if contemporary ideas are not translated into the respective languages, the language begins dying out; debasing itself from a language to a dialect and soon losing even that role and getting replaced.

Several of Sikkim's languages have already run this downhill slide. The regression, let's accept it, has also begun for Nepali and needs to be reversed. Real homage to his memory would thus be for those who know, to share what they know with the people, in a language that they were born into and understand best. Language should be celebrated not for its purity, but for its effectiveness in sharing ideas and bridge communication gaps. In the meanwhile, celebrate the idea of Bhanubhakta; the Adikavi not because he was necessarily the first poet, but more importantly because he was the First People's Poet...

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COVID-19 Pandemic May Produce Dramatic Changes in Life Expectancy, Birth Rates and Immigration

KATE CHOI & PATRICK DENICE
THECONVERSATION.COM

Pandemics have historically given rise to major social and demographic transformation. Labour shortages following the Black Plague, for example, resulted in the rise of the middle class.

Like its predecessors, the current COVID-19 pandemic will likely usher in major social changes as a result of the excess numbers of deaths, disruptions to fertility and restrictions to immigration.

REDUCED LIFE EXPECTANCY

The most direct impact of COVID-19 are excess deaths. By early May 2021, the pandemic had infected 152 million people and had claimed over three million lives worldwide.

The excess deaths from COVID-19 may reduce life expectancy. Some researchers predict that life expectancy in the United States has decreased by 1.13 years due to COVID-19. The toll among Black and Hispanic Americans, who have seen their life expectancy drop by 2.1 and 3.1 years, respectively, has been especially high.

COVID-19 also has the potential to age vulnerable populations. A report from the Brookings Institute reveals that, relative to white Americans, higher shares of Black and Hispanic Americans who died from COVID-19 are middle-aged. Whereas whites comprise 62 per cent of Americans between the ages of 45 and 54, they account for just 22 per cent of people in that age group who have died from COVID-19. These differences imply that the pandemic will reduce the life expectancy of Black and Hispanic Americans.

DISRUPTED BIRTH RATES

Past work has consistently shown that fertility tends to decrease during long-lasting and deadly catastrophes. Global research with preliminary data suggests that the fertility trends during COVID-19

will follow this general pattern. The U.S. had experienced a small drop in births prior to COVID-19, but the rate of decline more than doubled during the pandemic.

Concerns about their own health may explain why some women decided to forego a pregnancy during COVID-19. Pregnancy is associated with a higher risk of developing more severe forms of COVID-19. Expectant mothers also had limited access to prenatal care during the pandemic because many health practitioners scheduled less frequent in-person appointments to minimize exposure to the virus.

Some women may have chosen to forego a pregnancy during the pandemic out of concern for their infant's well-being. Infants can contract COVID-19 shortly after birth and, because their lungs are less developed, they are at higher risk of developing more severe forms of COVID-19 relative to older children.

ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY AND BIRTH RATES

Prolonged economic uncertainty may be another reason women have disrupted their fertility during COVID-19. The global pandemic and lockdown policies have exposed individuals to uncertain economic futures. Some couples may forego having a child during the pandemic because they are concerned about their job and economic security. People may not wish to bring a child into this world when they do not know where their next paycheck is coming from or whether they will have a roof over their heads.

Others may forego childbearing because the pandemic has forced them to confront their own mortality. Many expectant parents may delay or eschew childbearing if they cannot envision a future in which they will be able to provide a loving and secure environment for their child to thrive. This may

be especially true for those in communities hardest hit by the pandemic.

Increased child-rearing demands is another reason behind the pandemic's fertility decline. School and daycare closures have meant that parents have had to take on many new responsibilities, including assisting with their children's remote learning.

According to a survey of caregivers conducted by the Boston Consulting Group in April 2020, the amount of time that parents in the U.S. and the United Kingdom spent on education and household tasks doubled to roughly 60 hours from 30 per week. Overwhelmed with the additional parenting responsibilities, parents may not welcome the challenge of caring for a newborn.

With only preliminary data, whether these fertility disruptions will hold or reverse themselves as the pandemic winds down is unclear. However, in the past, a portion of the women who delayed their fertility in response to a long-lasting, catastrophic event never "made-up" their earlier disruptions.

In addition, for decades, fertility has been steadily declining in developed countries due to the growing expenses related to child care, education, health insurance and housing. Demographers cautiously predict that COVID-19 will accelerate fertility's decline, which will in turn worsen population aging.

MIGRATION PATTERNS

COVID-19 may have also altered patterns of international migration. Roughly 105,000 border restrictions were implemented around the world in response to the pandemic. These restrictions, coupled with delays in processing visas, have hampered migrants' mobility and contributed to a temporary decline in the number of inter-

national migrants worldwide.

Additionally, the pandemic is likely to have long-term impacts on immigrants' decisions to move. COVID-19 outbreaks in migrant work sites have unveiled the substandard living and working conditions of migrant workers. Temporary migrants are often assigned to dense accommodations that do not offer the space necessary to follow social distancing guidelines. And their workplaces often lack adequate personal protective equipment.

Anti-immigration sentiment has also increased and hardened during the COVID-19 pandemic. One in five Canadians report that they have developed more negative attitudes toward immigration since the pandemic started. The use of racist phrases like "Kung-flu" to refer to the pandemic has further stoked anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes.

WHAT WILL THE LASTING IMPACT BE?

Though it is too early to tell how temporary or long-lasting the impacts of COVID-19 will be, it is clear that the pandemic has already brought significant changes. These changes, in turn, have disproportionately affected non-white, immigrant and lower-income populations.

COVID-19 has magnified disparities — in life expectancy, population aging and fertility — across society's haves and have-nots. The pandemic has also erected barriers to internal and international migration. In the absence of policies aimed at improving the living and working conditions of migrant workers, many countries may have difficulty filling labour shortages, mitigating population aging and achieving post-pandemic recovery.

[Kate Choi is Associate Professor, Sociology, Western University; Patrick Denice is Assistant Professor of Sociology, Western University]

This Mother's Day, pay attention to racialized women leading resistance movements, like Tamil mothers

VIVETHA THAMBINATHAN
THECONVERSATION.COM

On Mother's Day in 2009, over 2,000 Tamil protesters stepped onto Toronto's Gardiner Expressway, chanting "no more genocide," blocking every lane of the highway, bringing traffic to a standstill.

These protests were in response to an atrocity that took place near the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, a war that lasted 26 years and ended with genocide. The atrocity saw tens of thousands of Tamil civilians lured by the Sri Lankan government into "no fire zones", and trapped under gunfire.

When news broke, Toronto Tamils took to the streets to demand justice after months of peaceful protests, hunger strikes and rallies across the city. The Gardiner protest was a pivotal moment for Toronto Tamils, in terms of both shaping their political identity, and recognizing the strength of community mobilization.

Tamil women formed the front lines of this protest and deliberately chose this role to de-escalate any potential conflicts between other protesters and the police. Tamil women have been active leaders and participants in resistance movements, both in Canada and Sri Lanka. This is work that has been happening for decades.

As an Eelam Tamil anti-racism educator and scholar-activist who has spent all her life in Toronto, my doctoral research is located within the intersections of trauma-informed migrant healing, liberation psychology and arts-based participatory action research. I am grounded in a decolonial theoretical framework and committed to global feminisms.

This Mother's Day, I encourage you to reflect on why mainstream media doesn't recognize racialized women-led global resistance movements as feminism. Western society's narrow view of feminism is grounded in white assumptions and catered towards the privileged, excluding acts of resistance by racialized mothers as feminism.

This article seeks to centre Tamil mothers in a feminist dialogue that otherwise would be drowned out by white noise.

HEADLINES FUELLED RACISM

The demonstration by the Tamil community in Toronto garnered overwhelmingly racist attention and negative media coverage,

labelling them as ungrateful immigrants, and strategically using the "women and children" phrase to paint a passive, patriarchal image of Tamil mothers, ironically on Mother's Day.

The National Post published phrases like: "let's call it the Tamil traffic strategy," and "rabid Tamils surged into roadways blocking traffic ... turning from figures of sympathy into bloody nuisances, from citizens into adversaries, from freedom fighters into extortionists."

And there was a focus on othering the Tamil community, dehumanizing their existence, delegitimizing their demonstrations and removing the agency and will of women and mothers participating in and leading these protests.

WESTERN FEMINISM

Historically, feminism has excluded racialized women.

When we think of when women got the right to vote in Canada, it tends to go back to when white women got it — in the 1920s. But it wasn't until 1948 that Chinese, Japanese and South Asian women were able to vote and Indigenous women received this right even later, in 1960. Simply put, popularized feminism is not intersectional. As feminist, and social activist bell hooks eloquently writes:

"White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective of women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group."

Global feminist movements and everyday acts of women-driven resistance by racialized mothers and women don't get the same spotlight as mainstream western feminist campaigns. Non-western feminisms are often historically erased and remain invisible within the media.

TAMIL WOMEN AND MOTHERS FIGHTING FOR THEIR COMMUNITY

Tamil mothers and women are the glue to our community's solidarity, activism and resistance.

Eelam, the native Tamil name for the island of Sri Lanka, has the second-highest number of enforced disappearances in the world. And for the past four years Families of The Disappeared has been fighting for truth and justice and searching for their loved ones.

Approximately 100,000, predominantly Tamil people, have been disappeared by the state since 1983. Now 12 years since the end of the armed conflict, the whereabouts of the disappeared are still unknown.

Women and mother-led protests by Families of the Disappeared began in 2017 with roadside demonstrations in Kilinochchi to demand answers for the fates and locations of their loved ones. Sister protests across the island were also mobilized in Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi and Maruthankerny.

These demonstrations are characterized as ammas (mothers) and ammamas (grandmothers) sitting on the road, holding photos of their loved ones, in all weather conditions, despite militarization and intimidation by police. At least 78 people have died in this pursuit of truth and justice.

And their work largely goes unrecognized. By mainstream media not identifying and highlighting these mother-led resistance movements, they are contributing to the erasure of these narratives. These powerful stories deserve to be told. This is the kind of work you should picture when you hear the word feminism.

MARGINALIZED WOMEN-LED FEMINISM IGNORED GLOBALLY

There are parallels between the plight faced by Tamil women and the plight of Indigenous women in Canada who have spent over four decades documenting, raising awareness and demanding justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. As a Tamil woman living in Canada, I couldn't ignore these parallels.

Feminism, as it is portrayed by mainstream media, should not be reserved for privileged white women. The intergenerational struggles and resistance of racialized women and mothers living in the west, particularly of Black and Indigenous people, is often not given space.

This Mother's Day, join me in searching for global stories about racialized mothers and women you haven't heard before. Not because they didn't happen or has less of an impact, but because they were not given the same attention.

[the writer is PhD Candidate, Faculty of Health Sciences, Western University]

Kathmandu hospitals face shortage of oxygen, many have stopped admitting patients

ARJUN POUDEL

KATHMANDU, 09 MAY [KATHMANDUPOST]: Kist Hospital in Lalitpur had 50 Covid-19 patients on oxygen support including 13 on ventilator on Saturday. But at 3:20pm the hospital was about to run out of oxygen.

"We were about to crash," Dr Suraj Bajracharya, medical director at the Kist Teaching Hospital, told the Post.

Relatives of the patients were panicking and some had started to cry.

The hospital pleaded with the Ministry of Health and Population, senior police officials in the district, Covid-19 Crisis Management Center, and district administration office about the critical shortage of oxygen.

The National Trauma Center finally came to the hospital's rescue.

"We sent 15 cylinders to the Kist Teaching Hospital today," Dr Santosh Poudel, director at the National Trauma Center, told the Post. "We too do not have many cylinders in stock. But to save the lives of those critically ill we sent those cylinders."

The patients who needed oxygen were saved.

"Had we not got the oxygen all the patients in the intensive care unit, on ventilators and general beds would have died within half an hour," Bajracharya said.

As the country grapples with the deadly second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, hospitals throughout the country have been facing acute shortage of oxygen.

Nepalgunj Medical College Teaching Hospital of Banke, one of the worst hit districts in the country has been turning back patients every day since it does not have enough oxygen.

There have also been reports from various districts as well as from the Kathmandu Valley about deaths of Covid-19 patients due to lack of oxygen supply.

Kist Hospital, like many across the country, has said that it has stopped admitting new patients due to shortage of oxygen.

"We have also written to the Health Ministry informing it that we cannot provide treatment to Covid-19 patients due to shortage of oxygen," said



Bajracharya.

The hospital, which can provide care for over 300 infected patients, has not only stopped admitting new patients but also warned that it would be compelled to stop providing care to its patients if oxygen supply is not ensured.

The 15 cylinders that it has received from the National Trauma Centre is only a stop gap measure.

"We don't know what will happen at night," Bajracharya said at 6pm Saturday. "We have sent empty cylinders for refilling but have not got them yet."

The hospital needs over 400 cylinders a day but is getting only around 150.

Oxygen bottlers said they are not in position to meet the growing demand for oxygen cylinders, as demand now is more than four-fold than the total capacity of the industry.

"We are also shocked by the soaring demand for oxygen in the last four days," said Narayan Timalsina, chairman of Sagarmatha Oxygen Nepal Pvt Ltd. "Demand is more than four fold than the actual capacity of the industry."

According to the Oxygen Industries Association, a grouping of Kathmandu Valley-based suppliers, oxygen manufacturing companies in the Valley have capacity to produce oxygen for 8,000 cylinders per day.

"My own company can produce 800 cylinders a day but demand is for over 2,500 cylinders," said Timilsina who is also the general secretary of the association. "Relatives of patients have been coming to the industry directly and pleading for oxygen."

It is also not possible

to ramp up the capacity of the industry overnight, he added.

Doctors say fatality from Covid-19 will increase several fold if the patients who have been suffering breathing difficulty are not provided oxygen support.

"There are 23 patients on oxygen therapy on the grounds of our hospital," Dr Sagar Rajbhandari of Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital told the Post. "All the patients who have been admitted or staying on our hospital premises need high flow oxygen supply."

The hospital, which has its own liquid oxygen storage, has been using bottled oxygen after it ran out of liquid oxygen, it normally uses, a week ago. The supply of liquid oxygen has stopped due to the restriction in export by India.

It used to use two cylinders of oxygen per day in normal times but now it needs 400 cylinders a day.

The National Trauma Center, which also has its own liquid oxygen tank, said that due to a halt in supply from India, it has been using bottled oxygen.

"We are told that India has lifted restrictions on oxygen export and a tanker carrying liquid oxygen has left Birgunj for Kathmandu," Poudel, director at the Center, told the Post.

But for most of the hospitals in Kathmandu, it is oxygen cylinders that they have to depend on.

Shankar Oxygen Gas Pvt Ltd said over 30 hospitals have sent their cylinders for refilling.

There are eight oxygen factories in Kathmandu Valley which have around 70,000-

80,000 cylinders, according to the association.

There are plans to import 20,000 cylinders from China but again, they will not arrive overnight.

The government is taking delivery of 400 oxygen cylinders it is receiving as grant assistance from China and a Nepal Airlines aircraft is flying to Beijing on Monday to get them.

"The cylinders will have a combined weight of 27 tonnes which is enough for a plane to carry," Dim Prasad Poudel, managing director at the Nepal Airlines, told the Post.

China is providing 3,500 cylinders along with 10 ventilators on grant, according to D.B. Chhetri, under secretary at Nepal's Finance Ministry

"After the 400 oxygen cylinders arrive, China will have 1,600 cylinders ready for delivery in the next two weeks," Chhetri, who oversees economic cooperation with China at the ministry, told the Post. "The government will send planes again to get the remaining cylinders as per the decision of bringing 2,000 cylinders by air."

According to him, the remaining 1,500 cylinders will be brought by land route as per the agreement with China.

"The Chinese side will deliver these oxygen cylinders at the Rasuwagadhi border point and Nepal will receive them there in the next three weeks," he added.

Cylinders could not be delivered immediately due to a mismatch of cylinders' valves in Nepal and those available in the Chinese market and new valves needed to be designed and manufactured, according to

Chhetri.

Even though Nepal had sought 20,000 cylinders from China in grant assistance, officials said it is not clear whether China would provide all of them in grant or Nepal will have to pay for them.

Meanwhile, hospitals in Nepal are scrambling.

Alka Hospital in Lalitpur Friday evening issued a notice saying that it would not admit new patients due to lack of oxygen.

"The problem is not only of our hospital but all private hospitals in the Kathmandu Valley," Kumar Thapa, chairman of the Hospital told the Post. "But other hospitals have not said so publicly."

Thapa, who is also the senior vice-president of the Association of Private Health Institution Nepal, said that his hospital too needs over 200 oxygen cylinders a day, of which it produces 30, but the bottlers have not been able to supply as per the demand.

And more people continue to get infected and die of Covid-19 complications.

Nepal on Saturday recorded 8,287 new cases from the 17,315 polymerase chain reaction tests and 131 from 989 antigen tests. The country recorded 53 deaths. The death toll has reached 3,632. Active cases stand at 83,493.

"Of the total tests performed in our hospital, the positivity rate is over 60 percent today," Rajbhandari, director at the Sukraraj Hospital, told the Post.

Nationally, the positivity rate on Saturday was 48 percent, a record. Authorities feel helpless.

"I feel completely hopeless," Dr Samir Adhikari, joint spokesperson at the Health Ministry told the Post. "Luckily we could arrange some cylinders and prevent a disaster at Kist Hospital. Situation is more or less similar in all hospitals of the Valley."

Adhikari, who had been aware of the situation at Kist Hospital for the last three days, had been depressed due to his failure to arrange oxygen and the looming disaster.

"Situation has already gone out of control and the Health Ministry alone cannot do everything," Adhikari said.

the spokesman said.

Assessing the ongoing vaccination drive, Mathur said the department must ensure that the vulnerable and frontline populace in the 18-45 age categories must be prioritized for vaccination, while ensuring zero percentage of wastage.

Mathur said while all infrastructure is being put in place, stricter control on entrance into Ladakh must be ensured by both Deputy Commissioners (Leh and Kargil).

He also directed setting up of UT and District control rooms and for providing tele-medical consultation in Leh and Kargil districts, the spokesman said.

Massive Covid vaccination drive in UP from May 10 for 18-plus

LUCKNOW, 09 MAY [PTI]:

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Saturday said a massive coronavirus vaccination drive will be initiated for 18-44 years age group in the state from May 10. He said the drive will be conducted in 17 municipal corporations and Gautam Buddh Nagar area.

"The vaccination drive will be held in Aligarh, Agra, Prayagraj, Kanpur, Ghaziabad, Gorakhpur, Jhansi, Bareilly, Meerut, Moradabad, Lucknow, Varanasi, Saharanpur, Firozabad, Mathura-Vrindavan, Ayodhya and Shahjahanpur municipal corporations and Gautam Buddh Nagar," the CM said.

Speaking to reporters in Bareilly, Mr Adityanath said despite being the most populous state in the country, Uttar Pradesh is fighting the disease effectively.

He underlined that vaccination is the best way to defeat the infection, adding that 45 lakh vaccines have been

administered to people above the age of 45 years.

In the age group of 18-44 years, more than one lakh vaccines have been administered. The vaccination for people in this age group started on May 1 for seven districts in the state, namely Lucknow, Kanpur, Prayagraj, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Meerut and Bareilly, he said.

Talking about the achievements of his government in fighting the pandemic, the chief minister said, "There were doubts that COVID-19 positive cases will touch the one lakh-mark by May 5, and today is May 8. The count of fresh cases on Saturday stands at 26,847. We have proved to be successful in COVID management."

"The second doubt was that cases will increase during the panchayat polls. The panchayat elections ended on April 19, and there has been a continuous drop in the number of cases," he underlined.

The BJP leader said UP recorded the highest single-day spike of COVID-19 cases at 38,055 on April 24, and the highest count of active cases of 3.10 lakh was recorded on April 30.

"In the past eight days (from May 1 to May 8), the COVID-19 cases have registered a drop at 65,000; and the number is continuously decreasing. In the past one week, the number of active COVID-19 cases in Bareilly has dropped by 2,800," he noted.

Mr Adityanath said there were 20-30 oxygen beds in a 500-bed hospital, but today in a 500-bed hospital, every person is feeling the need for oxygen.

"Special plans have been made as the demand for oxygen has grown many times, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved 61 new oxygen plants for UP. The process is on to set up one oxygen plant in every district by the sugarcane department," he said.

169 new COVID-19 cases push Mizoram's tally to 7,551

AIZAWL, MAY 9 (PTI): At least 169 people, including 12 policemen who had returned from West Bengal after election duty, have tested positive for novel coronavirus in Mizoram, pushing the state's COVID-19 case-load to 7,551, an official said on Sunday.

So far 287 police personnel out of 705, who had gone for poll duty in West Bengal and Assam, have tested positive for the infection, the official said.

Of the 169 fresh COVID-19 cases, 105 were reported from Aizawl district, Lunglei (11),

12 cases each from Siah and Kolasib districts, Saitual (10), Serchhip (7), Khawzawl (8) and Mamit (4).

At least 2,667 samples were tested in the last 24 hours registering an infection rate of 6.37 per cent, the official said.

Fifty-two patients have travel history while the rest were found to have locally contracted the infection, he said.

Of the 169 patients, 56 have developed symptoms of COVID-19.

Mizoram now has

1,951 active COVID-19 cases, while 5,583 people have recovered from the infection.

The COVID-19 recovery rate is 73.94 per cent and the coronavirus death toll in the state is 17.

The northeastern state has so far tested 3,28,901 samples for COVID-19.

According to state immunisation officer Dr Lalzawmi, a total of 2,25,852 people have been administered the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine of which 47,945 people have also received the second dose.

Maruti Suzuki extends maintenance shutdown due to pandemic

NEW DELHI, 09 MAY [REUTERS]: The country's largest car maker, Maruti Suzuki India Ltd, said on Saturday it was extending a planned maintenance shutdown until May 16 from May 9 citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was not immediately clear if the shutdown was to ensure safety of its workers or due to lower demand.

The coronavirus pandemic pushed India's passenger vehicle sales to their lowest in six years, annual data from an auto industry

body showed last month, with the sector bracing for further fallout from a recent surge in cases. India on Saturday reported its highest ever single-day COVID-19 deaths, as cases continued to rise and states imposed stricter lockdowns.

Three new oxygen plants to come up in Ladakh by May end

LEH, MAY 9 (PTI): Three new oxygen plants will be commissioned in the Union Territory of Ladakh by the end of May to meet the needs of coronavirus patients.

This was stated at a meeting chaired by Lt Governor R K Mathur here on Saturday to review the preparedness of the health department for COVID-19 handling with detailed discussions on infrastructure, procurement of essential equipment and medicines, an official spokesman said.

The 'Site Readiness Certificates' of the three oxygen generating plants at Drass,

Padum and Diskit has been approved by the central government and civil and mechanical works are going on at these sites, an official spokesman said on Sunday.

The oxygen plants would be dispatched by the supplier shortly and the plants will be commissioned by the end of May, 2021, Principal Secretary Health and Medical Education Pawan Kotwal said.

National Hydroelectric Power Corporation has also agreed to provide a 2x500 LPM oxygen plant for Kargil, while a plant of similar capacity is proposed to be set up



at Leh to augment the oxygen generating capacity from the present 1000 LPM to 2000 LPM, the spokesman said.

The Lt Governor said Ladakh must be fully equipped with a complete set of facilities including hospital beds, oxygen supply, medicines and additional manpower.

He also asked the department to explore the feasibility of set-

ting up special paediatric COVID wards keeping in view the availability of pediatricians in Ladakh for managing these facilities.

The meeting also deliberated upon achieving vaccination goals and imposing stricter restrictions with emphasis on COVID appropriate behaviour and intensifying RT-PCR tests to control the situation,

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Dominant Strempl wins online shooting competition

NEW DELHI, MAY 9 (PTI): Martin Strempl of Austria capped off his dominant run with a convincing 2-0 whitewash of Serbian Milenko Sebic to win the TOPGUN online shooting competition.

The tournament, which concluded on Saturday night, was organised by former India shooter Shimon Sharif.

From the start of the 10-day event, Strempl was in sublime form with his Steyr air rifle. He won the qualification match by a distance with a score of 636.6 (3.1 more than world record), and was hardly tested by Israel's Shiri Strenberg and world no. 3 Lucas Kozeniesky of USA in the quarterfinal and semifinal, respectively.

The final was expected to be a close affair but the experienced Serbian failed to test the Austrian Olympic quota winner.

Milenko didn't look in his best shape in the competition. Apart from participating in the online meet, the Olympian took part in events in Croatia and Austria.

This saw Milenko drive long hours as he competed in various stages of this competition from three countries.

Though he shot from the comfort of his home in the final, fatigue prevented him from giving his best.

If this played to Strempl's advantage, what swung the final firmly in his way was the experience gained over the past few months in online competitions across platforms.

The pressure of the 'Race to 10' is not for the faint hearted and for once even Strempl succumbed to it towards the closing stages of the first match.

Rarely would a shooter at the top level score a point with a sub-10 score, but that's what happened when Strempl floundered with a 9.4 in response to Milenko's 9.8.

He went on to wrap it up with two high 10s to make it 10-7.

Milenko lost, but it was in no way a surrender. Like Strempl, he too shot a sub-10 just once, but what made the difference was the intensity of his rival's performance.

Two perfect scores and six 10.8s are tough to reply to, and it was to Milenko's credit that he fought back in the second match after Strempl looked to be cruising with a 6-1 lead.

The World Cup Final silver medallist paused to have a word with wife and coach Alina, which led him to close the gap to 5-7.

"She told me to keep fighting, that made me feel better but it wasn't enough," said Milenko.

"I arrived in Serbia from Austria at 2 AM and was tired, but it is not an excuse. It was a tough match," he added.

Despite the fatigue Milenko will be turning up for his country's national trials in 3 position on Sunday.

Sergio Agüero's rush of blood gives Thomas Tuchel a day to savour

BARNEY RONAY LONDON, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Oh, Sergio. A reminder from Mr Guardiola to all boys – particularly those who are leaving the Etihad Campus at the end of the year. Term is not over. The final exam is not yet passed. And this really isn't the moment to start having fun.

This was an odd, increasingly gripping game. A 2-1 Chelsea win only delayed the inevitable title celebrations for Manchester City. But it carried a genuine significance for Thomas Tuchel, firming up the likelihood of a top four finish and ensuring his future employment to – shall we say? – at least November.

Whatever happens from here, the last half-season has been a startlingly assured and lucid period of coaching-on-the-hoof from a man who really does look and sound like he's enjoying himself to an indecent degree right now.

It took a while to get there. At times in the first half Manchester City and Chelsea seemed to be dishing up the kind of weekend fare we might have witnessed under the Super League regime – players rested, feints and bluffs in play, a game with another game on its mind.

At which point a football match broke out, pegged around an act



of unexpected slapstick in first-half injury time from a man who has 182 Premier League goals to his name and has earned a degree of balls-of-steel arrogance.

With 44 minutes gone Raheem Sterling scored the opening goal, made by a fine surging run from Gabriel Jesus. His cross evaded the cover. Sergio Agüero produced an unintended assist, his clumsy touch taking the ball to Sterling, who finished easily.

At that moment City looked to be entering that place, the podium zone. All the more so as they were awarded a penalty in stoppage time after more fine, ferrety work from Jesus.

Agüero took the ball with a chance to kill this game, to kill the title race, and to ease the whirling in his manager's mind over rest and downtime and game management.

At which point, Agüero decided to go for the panenka. "It was his decision," Pep Guardiola shrugged, doing a decent, if unconvincing impression of a man who is, like, totally cool with this kind of thing – details, whatever – and hey, it's just a game.

It was a poor panenka – caught with embarrassing ease by Édouard Mendy – and a poor decision from a man who looked vague all afternoon. On the touchline Guardiola could be seen striding towards the tunnel, limbs stiff with rage, hood bouncing primly.

His mood will have been further darkened by Marcos Alonso's late winner, and by the fact City should have had a penalty shortly before as Kurt Zouma challenged Raheem Sterling clumsily from behind. At the tail-end of a season where penalties were at

one stage being given for halitosis, unkind remarks and the mere possession of fingers and arms, it looked like a refereeing mistake.

But Guardiola will also have found some clarification of his own as both teams look towards that end point in Istanbul (or similar). Nathan Aké and Benjamin Mendy will not form City's defensive right flank, where Timo Werner was once again a source of incision.

Sterling scored his second goal at the Etihad since 5 December. He still looks keen – a man constantly trying to fight his way back to that other place, the version of his own reality where the game becomes easy and the ball is once again his friend. He isn't there. But his movement is a weapon against this back three. Then there was Agüero, who has

been a rapier for so long but didn't look anywhere near the level of that starting team for the season finale.

Mainly this was Tuchel's day. In the FA Cup game Chelsea had found space behind City's full-backs. Guardiola fielded a counter-move of his own here, the great midfield fetishist going cold turkey and picking a starting team with five defenders.

City still played a high line, and at times Chelsea's high press caused problems. Werner loitered high up the field, spending much of his time in a role that can only be described as "off-side". There was a point to this. In that space he is a constant scattergun danger. He gave the assist for the winner. He worked, as Tuchel said, "like a dog". With better timing – or indeed any timing – in his runs he could have scored a couple himself.

Chelsea's equaliser with an hour gone came down that familiar channel of interest, this time on the right, Hakim Ziyech burying his shot expertly past Ederson's left hand. Guardiola has a problem to solve there.

And so on we go, a little closer to the endgame. City will be a different team in three weeks' time. But this was a significant step for Tuchel on several fronts.

'I am happy and proud': Neymar commits future to PSG until 2025

PARIS, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Neymar has signed a new contract tying the Brazil forward to Paris St-Germain until 30 June 2025, the Ligue 1 club said on Saturday. Neymar, 29, joined PSG in 2017 from Barcelona for a record transfer fee of €222m.

"I'm very happy, very happy to be extending my contract with Paris until 2025," Neymar said on PSG's official website. "The truth is that I'm very happy to be staying here for four more years, to be a part of the club's project, to try and win titles, to try and achieve our biggest dream which is the Champions League. So I'm happy to be staying at the club, to be a part of it and to be extending my contract."

PSG reached the Champions League final in 2020 and were knocked out by Manchester City at the semi-final stage this season. The Brazilian believes he can still win European club

football's biggest prize by staying in Paris.

"My goal when I came [here] was to help get Paris Saint-Germain to the top, among the very best, and we are getting close," he said. "We are gaining more and more experience to help us negotiate these types of games, to know how to play in the Champions League. And Paris is on the right track, we are getting closer and closer to the taste of winning the Champions League. I'm sure we can do it."

PSG's chief executive, Nasser Al-Khelaifi, said: "The core of our ambitious project to grow PSG is the heart, talent and dedication of our players. I am proud that Neymar Jr has reaffirmed his long-term commitment to the PSG family through to 2025, and will continue to delight fans. We are very happy to see him continue as part of our project and to be alongside us for many years to come."

Manchester United lose £200m training kit deal over fans' anti-Glazers campaign



JAMIE JACKSON LONDON, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Manchester United have missed out on a proposed new training kit deal worth £200m over 10 years after the Manchester-based company The Hut Group had concerns about the supporters' campaign to boycott the club's commercial partners in protest at the Glazers' ownership, the Observer understands.

Richard Arnold, United's group managing director, was told on Friday that THG had pulled out of a contract which was due to start on 1 July.

The branding of Myprotein, a Cheshire firm owned by THG, was due to appear on United's training kit and replace the branding of AON, sponsors of the club's Carrington training centre.

Last Sunday's supporter protest against the Glazers outside Old Trafford led to United's game with Liverpool being postponed until the coming Thursday. THG, it is understood, was taken aback by the subsequent social media and online backlash against United's partners.

An anonymous United fans group with the hashtag NOTAPENNY-MORE launched an online campaign to boycott the club's major partners, which include Adidas, TAG Heuer and Cadbury, and wrote an open letter to them vowing to target their products.

It is understood THG, a multibillion pound company with offices near Manchester Airport, was concerned that as a local business it would be targeted by disaffected fans in Greater Manchester.

AON's agreement expires on 30 June, which means United may struggle to strike a new deal of similar value to that proposed with THG.

The Glazers' move to join the now defunct European Super League heightened the supporter opposition towards the American family. There was also some disillusionment and embarrassment within the club at senior level about how the ESL breakthrough was presented.

Both THG and United declined to comment, with those familiar with the deal at Old Trafford confirming there are no ongoing talks.

Canelo Álvarez stops Billy Joe Saunders to unify titles before vast crowd in Texas

DONALD MCRAE ARLINGTON, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: The unforgiving nature of boxing was seen in the white towel that Billy Joe Saunders draped around his head as he walked slowly towards a waiting ambulance late on Saturday night in Arlington, Texas. He then used the towel to cover his bruised and swollen face.

Twenty minutes earlier, Saunders had cut a similarly forlorn figure in his corner as he told his trainer, Mark Tibbs, he could not see out of his right eye. A brutal uppercut from Saúl "Canelo" Álvarez in the eighth round had caused an immediate and horrible bulge. Saunders knew the damage was significant, both to his eye and to his chances of causing a huge surprise by beating Álvarez in their world super-middleweight unification bout. Tibbs turned to the referee to signal that the fight was over before the ninth round could begin.

As the journey began to the hospital room where Saunders would be examined in the expectation he had suffered a fractured orbital bone, the brash and sometimes obnoxious British fighter had time to reflect on the painful lessons of the week. He had arrived in Texas full of his usual swagger and boasts, and he appeared convinced he would take away Álvarez's WBA and WBC belts and add them to his own WBO world title.



Saunders had tried various stunts all week. He threatened to pull out of the fight following a dispute over the size of the ring. He spent much of his time trying to provoke Álvarez with crass needling. But, typically, Saunders overstepped the mark when he mocked a Mexican's interviewer's use of English – which seemed a bit rich when his own command of his native language can be wayward.

He remains a skilled operator in the ring. Saunders boxed confidently during the first seven rounds. He moved fluidly and landed flurries of punches to win a few rounds and ensure that, at the end of the seventh, he remained in contention in an interesting fight of contrasting styles. But it was obvious that Álvarez, the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world, was untroubled.

Fighting as a southpaw, and often keeping his hands low before

flicking out his snaking jab, Saunders kept Álvarez occupied as he stayed off the ropes, where he knew the Mexican would do his most hurtful work. But Saunders is a light puncher compared with Álvarez, who throws much harder and heavier blows – particularly to the body. A bare statistic after the fight told a clear story. Álvarez landed 58 power shots to the 30 thrown by Saunders.

Only one of those punches was needed to alter the entire shape of the contest and of Saunders' face. Álvarez evaded a right hand from Saunders in round eight and then, with crunching precision, uncorked a devastating right of his own. It was a shuddering uppercut, thrown perfectly by a master of his trade, and it rocked Saunders. His head snapped back and he reeled away in retreat. The damage was visible at once and Álvarez closed in with menacing authority. He knew the fight had changed course

and he waved to his roaring supporters, urging them to make even more of a din.

Saunders made it to the end of the round, but all his fiery spirit had evaporated as he trudged to his corner. An attempt was made to stem the swelling but Tibbs soon confirmed that Saunders was a beaten fighter.

Álvarez pummelled his chest in defiance of Saunders, who had upset him during the week and prompted a prediction from the normally restrained Mexican that he would win by a knockout between rounds seven and nine. "It was not as difficult as I expected," Álvarez said coolly, insisting he had won almost every round. "I think I broke his cheek. He was not coming out [for round nine]."

He paid an emotional tribute to the mainly Mexican crowd of 73,126, which set an attendance record for boxing in an indoor area in the United States. Texas has long

flouted any Covid-related restrictions but it was still an astonishing turnout. This latest Canelo showpiece was trumpeted as "the night boxing returned" – but, with few masks in the crowd and no social distancing, the health implications during a global pandemic were bluntly ignored.

Eddie Hearn, who promotes both men, was predictably in the corner of the winner and he insisted that "the only fight out there" for Álvarez is a final unification contest to clean up the super-middleweight division. Caleb Plant is the IBF title holder. Even before he faced Saunders, Álvarez had said he planned to unify all the belts by beating Plant in September. He reinforced that message in the ring when he turned to the camera, as if talking directly to Plant, and said: "I'm coming. I'm coming, my friend."

It will be a huge payday for Plant – but one freighted with danger. There are also various obstacles to overcome. Plant is promoted by the notoriously elusive Al Haymon, who might be reluctant to risk him against a supreme champion in Álvarez. It adds to the familiar tangle as Hearn tries to keep the relentless Álvarez happy by securing a fight he wants so badly.

Hearn defended Saunders against allegations that he had quit. "He couldn't see. He busted his eye socket."

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Beirut bakery grows own wheat to combat rising food insecurity

BEIRUT, 09 MAY [AL-JAZEERA]: As the deepening economic crisis continues, the soaring prices of basic necessities like bread have pushed many Lebanese below the poverty line.

With Lebanon's bakers relying on imported wheat to produce their goods, the cost of even the heavily subsidised traditional flatbread – eaten by rich and poor alike with most meals – has tripled since 2019.

Mavia Bakery, a small outfit tucked away in Beirut's Gemmayzeh district, is trying to ensure Lebanon has better food security and is less dependent on imported flour for its bakeries with a series of humanitarian projects.

Opened in 2020 by educational NGO Sadalsuud founder and avid baker Brant Stewart, the bakery works out of a co-operative kitchen in Tripoli and only hires women from marginalised communities.

"This space came about because I wanted to do something that is desirable and needed regardless of who makes it, otherwise it's not sus-



tainable," Stewart told Al Jazeera. "The number of people willing to buy something because of who made it dries up quickly – there are only so many beaded bags that people can buy, but everyone needs bread."

Currently, 80 percent of the wheat Lebanon consumes is imported from countries like Ukraine, which has high production on vast tracts of land Lebanon lacks. What little local wheat is grown is used as freekeh or burghul (bulgur).

"Wheat as a commodity crop is not finan-

cially viable in Lebanon. There are people who grow their own wheat for personal use but, on an industrial scale, local wheat doesn't happen," Stewart said.

"The flour that we buy here from the Bakalian mill, which is made from imported wheat, costs 1,500 lira per kilo [\$1], which is much cheaper than the local Bekaa wheat that we buy, which is for 5,000 lira [\$3.30] a kilo because there is not enough being grown to cover demand.

"There hasn't been a mill focused on mill-

ing locally grown wheat either – these massive mills working imported wheat can't just take a small amount of local stuff and mill it," he added. "These machines are huge and it really is the milling that is the missing link in the chain. Milling is an art and the milling that's happening on a smaller scale is not milled well and is low quality."

With the depreciation of the Lebanese lira, purchasing imported flour has driven the price of bread higher. With subsidies said to end in May,

the cost is expected to skyrocket.

Stewart's new projects centre on growing local wheat and installing a new stone mill for farmers to use freely, funded by a grant from the Middle East Children's Alliance, which he hopes will encourage growing more wheat locally and, in turn, make it the cheaper option.

The mill, which will be ready in June in agriculturally rich Zahle, will allow small-scale batches of local wheat to be milled into high-quality flour.

Scores of Palestinians in East Jerusalem wounded on holy night



JERUSALEM, 09 MAY [AL-JAZEERA]: Another night of violence left at least 90 Palestinians wounded after Israeli police cracked down on protesters outside occupied East Jerusalem's Old City, as concerns mounted on Sunday that the situation may spiral out of control.

An estimated 90,000 Muslim worshippers prayed at the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque on Islam's holy night of Laylat al-Qadr – or the "Night of Destiny", the most sacred of prayers during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan – on Saturday.

Some stayed on to protest Israeli plans to forcibly expel Palestinian families from their homes on land claimed by illegal Jewish settlers

in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem.

Israeli officers on horseback and in riot gear fired stun grenades and water cannon against Palestinians who in turn threw stones, lit fires, and tore down police barricades in the streets leading to the walled Old City's gates.

Israeli security forces were on high alert on Sunday, bracing for a further escalation ahead of what Israelis call Jerusalem Day. Many Israelis mark the day East Jerusalem was occupied in 1967 – and later annexed by Israel – with marches throughout Jerusalem each year.

About 30,000 Jewish

settlers are expected to participate in a march towards Damascus Gate in the Old City on Monday.

The gate will be closed to Palestinians until 7:30pm for "security reasons", Israeli police said, adding 3,000 forces would be deployed.

Israeli police on Sunday gave the go-ahead to the annual Jerusalem Day parade, a flag-waving display of Israeli claims to all of the city. Police spokesman Eli Levi said there were no plans to call off the march, despite the rising friction and potential for violence.

Monday's parade is typically attended by hardline nationalist Israelis and is widely perceived as provocative.

Elon Musk says he is 'first person with Asperger's' to host Saturday Night Live

LOS ANGELES, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Elon Musk has told viewers of Saturday Night Live that he "is the first person with Asperger's" to host the US sketch show, before joking about his son's name and smoking cannabis on a podcast for the first global livestream of the programme.

During the opening, the billionaire entrepreneur spoke of how he sometimes posted strange comments on his social media, saying: "To anyone I've offended, I just want to say 'I reinvented electric cars and I'm sending people to Mars in a rocket ship, did you also think I was going to be a chill, normal dude?'"

Musk also referred to an incident in 2018 in which he smoked a joint



during an appearance on Joe Rogan's show.

"A lot of times, people are reduced to the dumbest thing they ever did. Like one time I smoked weed on Joe Rogan's podcast. And now all the time I hear 'Elon Musk, all he ever does is smoke weed on podcasts'. Like I go from podcast to podcast, lighting up joints. It happened once, it's like reducing OJ Simpson to murderer."

Musk also introduced

his mother, Maye, who said she was excited for her Mother's Day gift. "I just hope it's not dogecoin," she quipped, referring to a cryptocurrency started as a joke and about which Musk has previously tweeted, to which he replied "It is!"

Musk's appearance also sparked a sharp fall in the value of dogecoin when he appeared to call it a "hustle".

Asked "What is dogecoin", Musk replied: "It's

the future of currency. It's an unstoppable financial vehicle that's going to take over the world."

When a show cast member, Michael Che, countered, "So, it's a hustle?", Musk replied: "Yeah, it's a hustle." And laughed.

The value of dogecoin dropped sharply during the programme, and was quoted as low as \$0.47 on crypto exchange Binance, down 28% from levels around \$0.65 before the show.

Musk, who is in a relationship with Canadian musician Grimes, also spoke about their first child, a son, after making headlines last year for naming him X AE A-Xii. Referring to the name, he said: "It's pronounced cat

running across keyboard."

The show's open also featured Miley Cyrus singing Dolly Parton's Light of a Clear Blue Morning, as the show's stars appeared in sketches with their mothers in recognition of Mother's Day, which is this weekend in the US.

The Saturday Night Live appearance turned out to be an extension of his roles as "technoking" and chief executive of Tesla and head of rocket launch company SpaceX.

Myanmar junta labels opposition government of ousted MPs a 'terrorist' group

YANGON, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Myanmar's military rulers have branded a national unity government formed by MPs forced to flee in the wake of the coup a terrorist group and blamed it for bombings, arson and killings as part of a propaganda campaign in state-controlled media on Saturday.

Myanmar's army overthrew the elected government on 1 February and detained elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, sparking months of protests during which hundreds of people have been killed by security forces. In response, local militias have been formed to confront the army while anti-junta protests have continued across the south-east Asian country and strikes

have paralysed the economy.

Saturday's announcement follows the junta's crackdown on independent news outlets, raiding media outlets and most recently banning satellite dishes and threatening prison sentences for anyone who violates the measure.

The national unity government (NUG), which was set up by pro-democracy politicians and operates under cover, itself describes the army as a terrorist force. The NUG announced this week that it would set up a people's defence force.

State television MRTV announced that the NUG, a committee of ousted lawmakers known as the CRPH and the new defence

force would all now be covered by the anti-terrorism law, saying: "Their acts caused so much terrorism in many places."

The anti-terrorism law bans not only membership of the groups, but also any contact with them. The junta had previously accused its opponents of treason.

Protesters marched against the junta in dozens of places on Saturday. At least 774 civilians have been killed by security forces and 3,778 are detained, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners activist group.

The junta says at least two dozen members of the security forces have been killed in protests.

Fighting has also

flared on Myanmar's periphery with ethnic armies that have been fighting for decades, some of which have rallied behind the protesters. State television said the army had advanced against the Kachin independence army in northern Myanmar, but there was no independent confirmation.

In western Myanmar, the newly formed Chinland defence force said it had overrun an army camp. The army made no comment on the report.

Myanmar's army took power alleging fraud in a November election that was swept by the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, who fought for democracy for decades before tentative reforms began a decade ago. The electoral commission had rejected the army's complaints.

Pope adds voice to call for pharmaceuticals to waive vaccine patents

ROBIN MCKIE VATICAN, 09 MAY [THEGUARDIAN]: Pope Francis has given his backing to the campaign calling for the suspension of coronavirus vaccine patents to boost supplies to poorer countries.

In a video message to the Vax Live event, Francis backed "universal access to the vaccine and the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights". And he added his condemnation of the "virus of individualism" that "makes us indifferent to the suffering of

others".

"A variant of this virus is closed nationalism, which prevents, for example, an internationalism of vaccines," he told Vax Live, an online charity concert, which was aired this weekend in aid of the international Covid vaccination effort.

The move is the latest development in an increasingly divisive battle over the proposal to relax patents taken out by pharmaceutical companies to cover the Covid vaccines they have developed. It is argued such a move would allow lo-

cal drugs companies to make "copycat" vaccines without fear of being sued for infringing intellectual property rights, and therefore boost vaccine supplies in nations struggling to protect citizens from soaring Covid cases.

The patent waiving proposal was given powerful support last week by the Biden administration in the US, which announced that it supported calls by India and South Africa – and many congressional Democrats – to drop intellectual property protections for coronavirus vaccines.

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STREET STYLE! Actress Sophie Turner turns heads in an oversized khaki blazer and black accessories in Los Angeles.

Barack and Michelle Obama mourn the loss of their beloved family dog Bo



The Obama family is expressing their heartache after their beloved dog, Bo, passed away.

Both Barack Obama and Michelle Obama shared the tragic news on their respective social media accounts on Saturday, May 8.

"Today our family lost a true friend and loyal com-

panion," the former President began his Instagram caption, alongside several images of himself and his pup. "For more than a decade, Bo was a constant, gentle presence in our lives—happy to see us on our good days, our bad days, and everyday in between."

The 57-year-old politician continued, "He tolerated

all the fuss that came with being in the White House, had a big bark but no bite, loved to jump in the pool in the summer, was unflappable with children, lived for scraps around the dinner table, and had great hair. He was exactly what we needed and more than we ever expected. We will miss him dearly."

I represent women who believe in pushing for change: Adline Castelino

Miss Universe aspirant Adline Castelino, who is preparing to take on the coveted pageant, says she epitomises women challenging the odds every day in their lives to make their dreams come true.

The winner of LIVA Miss Diva Universe 2020 has her sights on winning the prestigious contest, which is set to be held in the US on May 16.

"As a young girl growing up in Kuwait with no exposure, I would always look up to Miss Universe with so much awe but never imagined a girl like me who had a speech defect and had marks on her body could ever represent her country on such a prestigious platform.

"Leaving home at 15 pushed me beyond my comfort zone and forced me to look at positives in life and work on my strengths," Castelino told PTI in an email interview.

Born to Catholic parents Alphonse and Meera Castelino in Kuwait City in 1998, Castelino was 15 when she moved to Mumbai where she studied at St Xavier's High School and later graduated with a degree in business administration from Wilson College.

But things took a different turn for her when she participated in the LIVA Miss Diva Universe pageant, held in February 2020, and eventually emerged victorious.

"Life changed tremendously with the kind of responsibility that came on my shoulders and the interactions I had with people. I felt like I was a girl yesterday but now I had to walk towards being a woman, a woman who supported the society, raised issues that she believed in," Castelino said.

"I feel that the journey has taught me a lot, especially to be grateful for what I had and a position like this in society can always make a positive impact," she added.

The 22-year-old model said her strength lies in facing challenges head on.

"I represent those 664 million wom-



en from my country who believe in pushing for change irrespective of limitations. My life journey and my passion to create opportunities for girls like the one created for me makes me unique," Castelino said.

She said due to the coronavirus pandemic, she had an unusual kind of training for the contest.

"We are at the last leg of the preparation where all our hard work, sweat and tears, everything is materialising. I had a very unique year of training and meeting in the most unconventional way possible through Zoom app, over the calls, etc.

"Grateful to the extremely zestful and hardworking team and the panelists who always held the sails in rough seas," Castelino said.

Though she is extremely excited to represent India at the global stage, the model said she is worried about the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the country.

"I have always looked forward to this time and now that it is here, I want to live every moment of it. At the same time my country is going through dire conditions, a situation of such magnitude we haven't faced prior, so that feeling is really saddening for me but I aspire to

make my country proud and give them a reason to smile and be hopeful."

India last won the Miss Universe event in 2000 when model-actor Lara Dutta was crowned at the pageant. Before her, Bollywood star Sushmita Sen had won the competition back in 1994.

However, Castelino doesn't feel any pressure about bringing the crown back to her home country, adding she is humbled by all the love that has come her way.

"I feel the amount of respect and admiration that I have got for my position and the amount of work that I have been able to do and learn from has been enormous, and I feel that's the kind of love I would love to take it there," she said.

Castelino hasn't really thought about life post the Miss Universe competition but like many of her peers, she might also try her luck at acting.

"I have always been an adventurous person, open to trying every aspect of my personality in every opportunity that comes my way.

"So, of course I wouldn't mind it (acting) but I also aspire to venture into business since I am a business graduate, and my passion lies there too. So let's see what future has in store for me," she said.

'Liger' makers postpone teaser release of Vijay Deverakonda-starrer

The teaser release of South star Vijay Deverakonda's pan-India movie "Liger" has been pushed by the makers as the country fights the second wave of coronavirus pandemic.

The movie featuring the Arjun Reddy star as a boxer is directed by Puri Jagannadh of Pokkiri fame and features actor Ananya Panday as the female lead.

In a joint statement issued by filmmaker Karan Johar's Dharma Productions,

Deverakonda and Jagannadh the team expressed concern over the surge in COVID-19 cases in India and said the teaser of their film will be released later at a better time.

During these testing times, we hope you all are staying indoors and taking care of yourself and your loved ones. We were all geared up to reveal a power packed teaser for Liger on 9th May. However, due to the current scenario and environment that our coun-

try is facing, we have decided to postpone the same in the hope to share it with the world at a better time for us all, the statement read.

The team urged everyone to follow necessary precautions to contain the spread of the virus and get vaccinated.

Sit tight and until then we request all of you to stay safe, take care of all your dear ones, help each other and get vaccinated at the earliest.

"Take all the precaution-

ary measures as prescribed by the medical fraternity and be sure that we are all in this together. See you soon at the theatres when we are healthy and strong as a country, the statement added.

The first poster of the movie was unveiled in January this year.

The film is scheduled to be released theatrically in India on September 9 in five languages -- Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam.

Stana Katic's show 'Absentia' to end with season three

Actor Stana Katic has revealed that her thriller series "Absentia" will not be coming back with more seasons on Amazon Prime Video.

The actor, who played the lead role of Emily Byrne in the show, shared the news in a statement posted on her social media handles.

"Although we've danced with the idea of continuing the tale, 'Absentia' was always meant to be only three seasons, & I couldn't think of a better note to end on for any person on this plan-

et, but especially Emily and her loved ones," Katic, 43, said.

"I'm proud of our team for bringing themselves to this project in order to bring life to 'Absentia'. Thank you to Sony, Amazon, AXN, Showcase & all affiliates for your support of our special show," she added.

Created by Gaia Viola and Matt Cirulnick, the thriller show started on AXN in 2017 and returned with a second season in 2019.

Amazon picked up the show for its third season which was released on the

streamer's platform in July 2020.

The story is about FBI special agent Emily Byrne who disappears without a trace while hunting one of Boston's most notorious serial killers, and she is declared dead in absentia.

Six years later, she is found in a cabin in the woods, barely alive and with no memory of the years that she was missing. She returns home to learn that her husband has remarried and her son is being raised by the new wife, and she soon finds herself implicated in a new series of murders.

ARIES: Sometimes, you've just gotta put on your most magical robe embellished with stars, adorn yourself with jewels, spray on some sultry perfume, brew a cup of lavender, and watch the show unfold. The bad news: you have no control over what is taking place or what is about to take place in this time and space reality. The good news: you have a front row ticket to devour it all, and with mild interest, take a few notes. Remember Shakespeare's immortal words when you feel like somebody's tugging at your heartstrings: "All the world's a stage". That's right! All the world's merely a stage, Aries.

TAURUS: We all have our stories. Stories that we hold onto with our dear lives. But not all of these stories have their basis in reality, Taurus. Some of them are mere lies that, by way of repetition, we come to believe over a period of time. Today, the cards are urging you to ponder over the lies you've been telling yourself. The false beliefs that have convinced you that you are a limited being, limited by your circumstances. You are capable of so much more. Break free from the self-imposed prison, put on that superhero(ine) cape and go forth and conquer. Your kismet is in your hands, beautiful one.

GEMINI: You've been going back and forth on this decision, and it isn't doing you any good. The cards are urging you to close your eyes and tune into your heart space. How do you *really* feel about the given matter? Let your inner compass help you decide which way to go from here. Today, you're also being reminded of the golden rule 'what you sow, so shall you reap'. Setting an intention from a space of clarity is merely the first

step. It's the inspired action you take after that will help you move one step closer to the desired destination.

CANCER: Leadership expert and motivational speaker Robin Sharma says, "Smart leaders understand the power of publicly praising excellence in action. So do it often. Coach your teammates as to areas they need to improve in private. So they can save face." Just the words of wisdom you need to follow in order to bring about a change on the professional front, Cancer. Remember, we're all going through hardships at this moment. As a result, it's easy to lose sight of our career goals and slack every now and then. Instead of judging your coworkers, hold space for them to talk their feelings out. Something tells us a pep talk by you, coupled with a few words of encouragement, can help move mountains around here.

LEO: It's never about the flashy cars or the fancy jewels, is it? (Although a little bling here and there never hurt anybody!) So, what then, is the secret to true happiness, Leo? Something you may find yourself pondering this weekend. A good place to start: make a list of five things that you're grateful for and are keeping you sane in the midst of this storm. Don't just note down the points, though. Be as detailed as you can in your description. Make a note of special moments and uplifting conversations.

VIRGO: Some people believe it's easier to communicate your truth to strangers. It gets sticky with those who are close, you know? If this sounds familiar to you, we've got a problem at hand that needs to be addressed, Virgo. So, pay attention to how

you are communicating with your inner circle. Are you being completely authentic here, or relying on half-truths in order to keep things together? Remember, a unicorn dies every time you betray yourself a little. You wouldn't want to rob the world of its magic, would you now?

LIBRA: If the Rule of Three is to be believed, then everything we put into the Universe comes back to us threefold. The real question is: what do *you* feel inspired to create in your reality, Libra, and what are the seeds you are being called to plant consciously? The Universe is offering you a sacred cauldron, bedazzled with jewels and crystals in every colour, for you to brew a magickal potion that will change your physical reality.

SCORPIO: Truth tea: You'll always be 'too loud', 'too bossy', 'too ambitious', 'too dominating' and 'too career-oriented' for some people. They're certainly not your people, Scorpio. Those who love and accept you for who you truly are will never ask you to dial down your crazy or dull your sparkle. So, own your brand of magic, baby! Step into your power and go after your dreams with renewed passion. The mysterious forces above and below are applauding your spirit and betting on your big win!

SAGITTARIUS: Now is not the time to second guess the magnificent shift you are capable of creating in the collective—and your life is a living, breathing proof of this miracle. So, slow down, Sagittarius. Take a moment to soak it all in. What a long way you have come since you first embarked upon this journey! Here's something you want to keep in mind, though: this is

merely the first stage of Mission World Domination. You have many mountains to move on this journey. Hard work coupled with focus and discipline will help you achieve the impossible.

CAPRICORN: The Ancients believed that every time humanity shifts into a new era, the transition is marked by natural disasters of all kinds, political and religious wars, and economic challenges. Could this be true for where we are standing today? Are the mysterious forces somehow conspiring to help us usher in the light by moving through the darkness? While we may never have all the answers we seek, Capricorn, it is a comforting thought that we, as a collective, are birthing a New Age.

AQUARIUS: 2020 felt like being stranded at the airport with no flight in sight. 2021 was supposed to be your year—the year of the big change—but here you are, stranded all over again. While the frustration is real, Aquarius, it is also temporary. So, rise above. Rise above the limitations and remember the limitless being that you are. You are the change you have been waiting for and your circumstances ain't got nothing on you, beautiful!

PISCES: It's easy to externalise the problem, Pisces. To blame somebody outside of yourself for what's taking place in the collective. The real question is: what are *you* doing to fix things on a micro and macro level? Take matters in your hands and educate those around you to do the same. On the upside, those who have been fighting a legal battle will find that the scales of justice are tipping in their favour soon. Working with a lawyer you trust (or somebody who is an authority on the given matter) will help you take control of the situation.